

BOOK REVIEWS

BENEDETTO CROCE AND MODERN ITALIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY. *Benedetto Croce. Storia della Storiografia Italiana nel secolo decimono. (Scritti di Storia letteraria e politica XV e XVI.)* Bari: Guis Laterza e figli, 1921. 2 vols.

Philosophers of history are not the best judges of historical writing. As a rule, they fit in only with theorizers of history, men who write about history but who do not themselves produce it. At best they can be classed among those historians who, through occasional philosophical-historical rationalizations, furnish themselves with the opportunity to link up history with their own speculations. The genuine historian is not to their liking. He marshals together facts which will not fit into any system, and, besides, too much spiritless labor is bound up with his trade.

The most brilliant exception to this rule is Benedetto Croce. Although no one is less disposed than he to consider a mere collection and erudite compilation of historical material as history, and although he draws the line between "chronicles" and genuine history more sharply than anyone else, he does not, on that account, cast any reflection on the value of erudition as such. Besides he brings to his task a preparation which is seldom to be found among historical philosophers. He has himself written history not only in the form of essays, but in the form of laboriously worked-out monographs. To the history of his own birthplace, Naples, he has devoted works which treat not only of the cultural, but of the political, growth of that city, and fulfill all the requirements of critical and scholarly research. He can therefore judge historical productions as an expert. And he is also aware of how much he owes to scholarly research. The writer of these lines well remembers how Croce once told him that anyone who had never written history should not discuss theoretical historical questions. The peculiar position in which the historian finds himself when face to face with disconnected historical material can be appreciated only by one who himself has tried to fashion an intelligible representation out of the sources.

In no other subject does this supposition prove to be more significant than in connection with the history of Italian historiography in the nineteenth century, for Italian historiography since the "Enlightenment" has few great names to offer. The ordinary historical philosopher would have found among all the writers who at that time wrote history only a few worthy of mention; the ordinary savant would have offered a mere catalogue in which presumably a few diligent compilers and editors would have found first place. Croce has adopted neither method. He makes a sharp distinction between learned productions and the understanding of historical events as dealt with in advanced treatises; but he allows both their place. All the material, moreover, has been classified with superior excellence and arranged in its historical continuity most nicely. No chapter heading contains a name; most of the titles are named after schools, some of which are alluded to only in a descriptive way; as for instance, "The Historical Writing of the Pure Historians (Nur-Historiker)," or "The Anachronistic School" (an attempt to revive the form of humanistic historiography in opposition to the rationalistic tendency of the Enlightenment). And however indefatigably Croce searches out the most insignificant names, critics and essayists of the 30's and 40's, he does not lose himself in the material or allow a detail to get the best of him. I confess that the patience which Croce has shown in reading through so many comprehensive compilations is beyond my understanding; even one who knows how methodically he distributes his time and how quickly he absorbs the contents of a book cannot fully appreciate this point in connection with his latest work. But there is something about it which is even more remarkable. Justus Möser reproached the German historians of

his time with collecting a vast mass of records and then writing compilations about them with untiring zeal. Croce surely has more just claim to unflagging enthusiasm than these old collectors, but his exposition conceals any such effort. The author he writes about may be uninteresting and often is, but he himself is never so. His style is always fresh. He has yielded less in this book than in his others to his exquisite taste for irony (as is well known, he can give to abstract discussions inimitable charm); but in spite of the serious tone of the present work, the Olympian light of his superior brain shines through it all. What may have contributed greatly to the rounding off of the material is the fact that the work in mention represents a second edition. "The History of Italian Historiography in the Nineteenth Century" first appeared by chapters in his magazine, *Critica*, during the years 1915-20; in this reprint Croce has curtailed a good deal and has considerably reduced sample works of forgotten historians. But this is only incidental. What lends life to the book is not its formal completeness, but the fact that behind it stands an impressive, thoroughly independent and judicious personality, and that the original character of this personality speaks in every word, if not in every syllable, of the book.

It is therefore unnecessary to emphasize the fact that Croce cleaves to no party, nor to any school. Of course, one senses that he is more sympathetic with the Guelfs than with the Ghibellines and that the positivist school leaves him unsatisfied. But his judgment is always so well balanced and finely shaded that one cannot accuse him of bias. On top of that he has the courage not to let his criticism halt at any celebrated name. Consider, for instance, his remarks about Pasquale Villari. It has been our habit not to examine too closely the estimable writer of two such conscientious and useful books as "Savonarola" and "Machiavelli," and to pass over in silence the defects of these works. Croce unblushingly tells the truth. He stresses the point that the philosophical element of the school to which Villari belonged was the "last gasp of dying thought," "the residuum of ancient sentimental and ethical customs." "Owing to his generalized, abstract morality, Villari is not in a position to discuss an historical problem raised by a personality or an event." A "moral idea," to be sure, is found in all true thought." But Villari was not competent to discover this true morality in the life of a statesman like Lorenzo di Medici (how he shudders at the latter's immorality!), and he did not perceive that in the authentic or legendary anecdote which tells of Savonarola's confession on his death-bed, moral greatness lies not with the fanatical churchman, but with the politician, Lorenzo. If one reads critically Villari's book on Savonarola, one comes to the conclusion not only that the martyr was not the great man that his biography depicts him to be, but that this alleged forerunner of modernism was merely a left-over of the Middle Ages. The solution to the problem of Machiavelli is not furthered by Villari. For that task a "straight biography" like Villari's is not sufficient; it requires a dialectic conception of the relation between politics and morality and such a conception was closed to Villari, fettered as he was by a fixed dualism.

Croce has remarked in the preface to his "Historiography" that his book aims to furnish the youth of Italy who are students of history a method which, while in form consisting of an historical presentation, will be more effective as an actual abstract introduction to historical method. He has achieved his purpose brilliantly, all the more since his narrative is carried up to modern times (even Ferrero, who gets away with a bad rating, is mentioned). But it would be a pity if the work should serve such elementary aims only. Though there are sections in it which may not be palatable to the general public, especially outside of Italy, nevertheless, no one who is interested in the development of Italian culture in the nineteenth century can afford to overlook Croce's book. And whoever has been concerned with theoretical-historical problems will experience continuous pleasure in the nicety and sureness with which Croce applies his theories and judgments to his material even when he is dealing with the analysis of inferior works.

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(Translated by Arthur J. Nelson, Clark University.)